

# Mass Media and Political Disinformation in Indonesia

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## Abstract

This paper is the result of study that focus to media practices and disinformation especially to political disinformation in Indonesia. There are four factors that push this study so it was done seriously. First, information has the important role that can shape and color the reality. Second, freedom of information and expression require the accountable and transparency. Therefore it needs the responsibility for implementation. Third, information can be controlled by any kind of interests. Fourth, the spread of information can be limited, stored and deviated. The production and reproduction of information can be designed in according to any differences interests. Finally the gap to access of information can make it misusing and misleading. In this context mass media has significant position to make disinformation through selecting and drawing to the events in the line with the interests. Mass media can be controlled by the owner, parties, NGO (Non-Government Organization), and any factions that involve the competition. Then disinformation took place when communications conflict show up through giving false and mistaken information.

**Keywords:** Freedom of Information, Agenda Setting, Political Disinformation

## Introduction and Literature Review

In the democracy system, information has the significant position to enlarge the political awareness, define the political images and increase participation in the any stages of political processes. The good governance requires the political guarantees that people have the right to watch and control the elites. They can participate for public concerns, express the opinion and they also have the right to know the political behavior by getting the information.

James Madison argued that the government without information or without the ways that point out how the people get the information, was only irony and tragedy or the both. For Madison, information is knowledge. Knowledge itself is the power that can control and repress for those whom has no information or without knowledge (Pope, 2003:428). Alwi Dahlan (1997) said that the role of information is

still insufficient subject in getting attention more. Most give the attention to the role of communication as whole. But at the same time they did not give attention to the role of information in properly.

Apart from arguments, Jurgen Habermas (1987) explained that information can be discussed into four segments. First, information can be related to harassments, liar, or to misinform a thing. Second, information related to information display. In this matter, the problem is how people could present or represent in according to their own goals. Third, information could be perceived as a package to persuade the others. Fourth, information could be manipulated as commodity so it can be sold.

The conceptually, term of information is the function of degree of uncertainty to the situation (Littlejohn, 2002). The more uncertainty is the needed the more information. On the

contrary, the more certainty is the needed the less information. The most important thing is not on to whether the information is a lot of or a few, but it is for the sufficient of information itself.

As we know that competition of information can take several form of interests. We can find it in our everyday life. An issue contested to the other issues for any kind of reasons. It seems natural if they try hard to win this competition. Because by doing it, they can make the first definition to situation that they have. It also looks like difficult to avoid this condition. If we observe we know that each issue contained three dimensions: potentialities, contestation and acceptance (Suparno, 2010). In these contexts, the controversies can be perceived as a form of struggle of control (Heath and Millar, 2004:9). Each tried to control information by creating the good images or representation of good images. We persuade and convince others to do what they want to do through information and communication. In short, we manage the perception by information and communication that it shall give good impression, catching the interest and getting the power.

It means that everyone has different zone of meaning. The power of rhetoric that accompanied information or disinformation was defined by the actual member of the conflict and the channel capacities of communication. Control and effect can be caused the power, interests, ideology and channel of communication. Thus, what we have explained concluded that information is the core of discourses that can be functioned to create the public sphere. It is a term that Jurgen Habermas proposed it to describe the equal situation in the communication. The public sphere itself was intended to avoid the domination of the power through the political and capitalistic apparatus. In this context, communication is essential factor to support this relation more equal.

In the complex situation, information can be seen as the choices or alternatives for predicting. For Lusiano Floridi, information is meaningful of data that encapsulate the truth. The information can be mentioned as the misinformation when it tells the false, mistaken

and misleading information. However, the information can be said as the disinformation when the misinformation was conducted by motives. The consciousness to do the misinformation was clearly triggered to make false and mistaken directions. But the problem is at the sources. Disinformation sometimes was done through either overt or covert sources. Consequently we are often difficult to find out the sources or the communicator that deliver the mistaken information because of covert information.

There is the difference of types to describe disinformation. For instance, we wish to know to what the mistaken statements or false information can be said disinformation or not. This question is not easy to answer just by giving yes or no answer. Therefore incompleteness is not merely said as the disinformation if it was done without the motives. The most important thing to disinformation is to know whether the false or mistaken information was done by motives or not.

In the other word, the degree of disinformation was defined by sources whether they intend to make it false and mistaken information or not. Motives become the most important to identify that disinformation take place. Thus, we can't say information as the disinformation if there is no motive. Therefore, we can't claim the information become disinformation without verifying that show us that mistaken information was done by motives.

Beside the type that was explained, there is another type to clarify the disinformation. This explained show us that all efforts that creating the biases to specific cases can be said as the disinformation. Disinformation also can be seen through giving irrelevance information and abusing of man. To complete this insight, Carl (1990:110) gave us the definition of disinformation.

According to Carl, disinformation is as carefully contrived misinformation prepared by intelligence service for purposes of misleading, deluding, disrupting or undermining confidence in individuals, organizations or governments. The other definition was given by CFJ White (2001a). He explained that disinformation is the deliberate

dissemination of false information by person who may or may not receive compensation but who have specific agenda to counter the truth. To call someone an agent of disinformation implicates both motive and agenda. According Dahlan (2010), while information is jammed, buzzes and overlapping, either intended or unintended, information can be classified as disinformation if it was conducted to change perception so people took mistaken conclusion.

Based on the explanation, we can observe that anyone or organizations has potential to do disinformation. Disinformation can be conducted by person or institutions. Since political actors to government as well as mass media has potential to do disinformation. The involvement of mass media in disinformation can not be separated from the its own function and the role. Therefore, Denis McQuail (1998:141) warned us that freedom of press or freedom of communication should be directed to the openness of information and guarantees the available of information. What we called the freedom of press, it should be involved independent status, and access to sources of communication. The available of the sort of communications will raise the rational choices and rational alternatives.

Even we do understand that mass media have several important functions to increase the public awareness, it also has the power to manipulate and bias. As long as we know, to understand the framework of information management in the mass media, we need to scrutinize to production and distribution system within it. We can differentiate the content as information into three areas: factual, fictional and commercial. In the reality, relation among factual, fictional and commercial are not always complementing even conflicting each other.

For profit margin and capitalistic orientation, mass media frequently blurred information between factual and fictional, or factual and sensational. Therefore, finally we did not receive the information as the core of communication, but we receive the sensational, gossip, rumors and any kinds of prejudices. In this point, news did not give the information that

can reduce uncertainty, but in the contrary, people feel confusing.

That's why, these conditions influenced the political practices. The one of important functions of mass media in the political sphere is agenda setting. According McComb and Shaw (1984), political decisions and political choices are made up at the arena competition of clash of arguments or issues. Mass media can evaluate and form the opinion. Political activities could not be conceived comprehensively without news of media that form the forum for actors. In the other word, mass media is a forum where the any kind of news reflecting the conflict and giving references to society to relate the political thought and actions.

An issue and information show up through events. Definition of issue and information can be told as one of product from the primary orientation toward the development of event. Thus, based on this argument, it is easy to analyze how and why journalist make the priority. Their priority was created through perception toward the political and power practices, development of issue, conflict intensity and its value. Therefore, issue or topic in the mass media is not autonomous for contention or debatable but it inherently involve in the conflict that indicate the influence of the power.

There must be a pervasive selection in reporting the controversies, quality of human beings, moral foundation and complexities of society's problem. Therefore, news often presented in the sharper sentences, short statements, and drama in ameliorating the political constraints in getting the ends. Here It will state that salience the issues and transform the priority of issue is a frame of any kind of interests. In other word, the priority that was done by mass media is a political battleground in defining the issues.

In this perspective, we shall say that publicity has power to define anything to win the political competition. Later, mass media could frame, select, reflect, and even deflect the reality. Mass media is not merely representing the reality but also interpreting the reality. At the same time, this function can be controlled by anyone, any

groups or affiliations of politics and interests. It is the one of ways to understand how disinformation could take place at mass media when it disrupted the information for his own goals.

Another aspect to notice the possibilities of mass media did disrupting the information is a fact that news is a product of social construction of reality. Public opinion and political activities can be created and directed to build the political construction through media for political interests (Nimmo, 978:9-10). The power of opinion can be felt strongly when it faced the choices. Voice of majority can dominate the minority and finally direct in searching the advantages.

Up to this point, we are really aware that political disinformation on mass media are crucial problems. By multi-faceting position, mass media could do the disrupting and misleading information. Based on these reasons, this paper was written through scrutinize any kind of relations and some factors that influence mass media. These relations involved any basic of political structures, actors, and interests in the political arena. So, here we formulated the research question to focus and to clarify how disinformation could take place on the mass media. How disinformation on mass media could be explained by searching any relations that involved.

### **Direction and Advantages of Research**

The entire of this paper explored the relations of power in the mass media practices to investigate the disinformation on the Indonesia's mass media. Many understand that mass media is one of tools that can be used to obtain the goals in the political arena. Some motives also forced mass media to do disinformation. Some kind of motives can be spread of interests and affiliations. Political economy of media, political communication and political policies clearly influence the quality of media production and design the entirely of information that will be presented.

This proves us that media practices were defined by any factions which competes each other. Of course, this result pointed out that mass

media affect or was affected by the objectives and external conditions. Claim which stated that mass media has autonomous is not entirely true. Mass media can be used as a tool through any ways that operated within it.

Although like that, this research was very important especially for those who involve or participate in the media or political practices. This informed some lessons for us about media practices. It also explored how to and why the mass media did the disinformation. More than ever before, this research also was useful to understand the media policies in newsroom and climate organization of media. Thus, this research was actually dedicated to lecturer, media practitioners, journalists, political actors, student, consultant of communication, bureaucrats etc. We wish this research can give contribution in making awareness that mass media has power for society and has capacity to create misleading and mistaken information.

### **Approaches and Methodology**

The approach and methodology of this research implement qualitative and interpretive perspectives. Here, the approach did not focus to search the regularities of phenomena or the law of phenomena, but it focused to understand the media practices or *verstehen* in probing disinformation. Focus this subject is why and how. In the interpretive approach, meaning and interpretation has central position. Reality can be probed and understood through any perspectives. Therefore, truth is not achieved by generalization but it was obtained by inter-subjective of views.

The advantages and benefits of this approach is constantly keeping and touching to empirical domain. Relation between researcher and subject is close. This relation is one condition that made the researcher understand and catch the sphere of life in the empirical domain. But it still secure the biases in obtaining the data. The research sources were consisted of human and non-human (Lincoln and Guba, 1985:267). Human is usually used to get data through interviews or observation, diaries and life story.

Non-human involved documents, articles, artifacts, events, places, and so on.

It aimed to comprehend the mode of discourse as whole. Individuals who were interviewed were intended to construct of news, opinion, statements, discussion, and all information that reflected opinion climate especially political information during 2010 especially related to television news. Of course, interviews was conducted to construct here and now, back and forth toward individuals in related to political cases, events, actors, activities, institutions and motivations. Some issues are subject of research.

Beside that, this research also covered focus group of discussion that involve any social and professional groups for instances journalists, politicians, students, NGO, gender activists, get keeper media, and government. Their views in concerning disinformation and political disinformation on media were very important. First, several perspectives that notice the disinformation will be caught. Second, result of FGD can be used to formulate the cause and effect of the political disinformation. Third, FGD also articulated the essence of disinformation and political disinformation so it can be reduced and sorted through similarities and differences.

To get the best insight about media consumption and it related to the potent of disinformation to society, this also took survey in four sub-district in Yogyakarta province-Indonesia. Design of survey is to identify the time spend of media consumption especially for television. It involved audience's references to media specifically to which one television that audience trusted in getting the political information among the television media environment.

Gathering data was also conducted through content analysis. This research also collected any kind of documents, legislation drafts from parliament, and news coverage on media as material to construct the deviation or construct the possibility of disinformation. Finally, by doing it seriously and systematically, the result of this research can be drawn unto several factors influencing disinformation or political disinformation on mass media in Indonesia.

## **Mass Media and Political Disinformation**

When the raw material of news was gathered and published, it possesses several processes from pragmatics to essence. In other word, information production and reproduction must be in the discursive practices within media cultural and media industry. Discursive practices itself reflected the dynamic of newsroom before news was published or disseminated. There is a lot of interactions among of interests that caused the dilemmas. Dilemmas may happen between values of professional and entertainment, or dilemmas may happen between values of professional and business.

Factually, political disinformation on mass media can be seen into two forms: overt disinformation and covert disinformation. Overt disinformation means that sources of information can be identified, while covert disinformation indicated that sources can not be traced clearly. Even though, the form of political disinformation can be classified like that, research found out that there are some ways how and why mass media may conduct disinformation.

## **Disinformation and Agenda Setting Function**

Agenda media function can cause disinformation for political information. It inherently related to technical constraints to media that was defined by time and space, amount of pages or time for transmission. Therefore, media worker must do selection and priority. Ironically, selection itself implied to do covering the fact improperly and bias. What media worker told in his own media is not entirely involving all sides of interests. But, we should do understand that characteristics of media worker has closed relation to the content of media. Personal characteristics influence the quality of information.

Selection and priority process has clearly connection to what media worker perceived about reality. However, priority and selection may open political disinformation in hierarchical of organization structure that can be happened from journalist, reporter, chief editor or owner. This hierarchical pointed that any position in structure of organization has a level of power that confine the information which will published.



In this finding, it will be told that reality is not limited and borderless. Therefore, we must do understanding that when journalist presented the news without motives to do mistaken information, it can't be said as disinformation even he did incompletely. Here we intend to stress that disinformation can be took place when selection and priority was done by motive to deviate a thing.

### **Sources and Routines**

Media routine was assumed as one of ways where the disinformation took place. Media routines were drawing the pattern in which media got the news. This routine influenced journalist's work. Repetition sources or repetition of institution/organization, make journalist less sensitive to the public affairs. They tend less creative and less efforts to tighten the substantial of events, data and correlation to another aspect.

There is a high risk to disinformation when journalist trusted the sources and obeyed to mystics of formula in journalism without reserve. Check and balances did not do. They tend to obey the formula 5W+ 1 H as mystics and magic of journalistic modes. However, journalist just functioned as translator without interpretation and giving it insightful for the public affair. In other word, disinformation took place because journalist has no capacity and competence in enlarge the quality their own works.

### **Media Owners**

Disinformation can derive from media owners. Vision and mission of media corporate tend to intervene the independency of media in convey news or information to society. Intervention can also happen because media owner has several affiliations for instances political party and political organization. We can mentioned that Metro TV has been affiliating to Golkar Party and Surya Paloh as the prominent figure in the political arena. We can also mentioned that TV One has been affiliating to Golkar Party. For any cases, media owner frequently has ambition to close to government. It is easy to explain why media owner interested to close the government. First, government is central of power

in the politics. Second, government is partnership of media. That's why media owner need to close the government, Thus, conflict of interest can blur the goals for media coverage.

Beside that, media owner concerned very seriously when it related to the business orientation. The impact and effect of economic and business insight confine and qualify the content of media. Media did not represent information for public interests but for entertaining that was directed to get the amount of money. The content and audience was assumed as commodity in the turn, making blur between information and sensational or information and gossip.

It is the more fundamental when media owner involved conflict with others. Media was frequently used to frame and help in constructing media owner's interests. Consequently public became confusing seriously. One side they can not differ easy between substantial and trivial information, and the other side, public can conclude false and mistake to be caused getting the false information. In this situation, media owner used media as a tool to build the image and blame to others.

### **Rule of Political Game versus Government Regulation**

There is a crucial problem about flow of information toward rule of political and government regulation. It is frequently happened between rule of political and government regulation contradicting each other. We can notice that government has the very complex of structures, departments and councils. This supra organic of the government frequently give information much.

It's ironically, for the same cases, many give explanation and information that contradict one side to another side. One side protected its own department and other side protected the other department. One actor stated the one kind of information, on the other gave other information. At the certainty condition, journalist could not catch it critic and accurate. They only presented what they listened and heard without deepen the subject matter in the details so they

can synthesize all the statements although it seems contradicting.

From FGD result viewed that contradict between rule of politics and government regulation make it difficult to capture the information accountable and transparency. Situation of that condition directed to information corruption. It clearly produces the false and mistaken information. Without the capacities and competencies, journalist only functions a bridge of the information. In this context, journalists or all media worker needs to alert to the any kind of information that was obtained by government or bureaucrats. They need to understand the complexities of information in related to the political affairs.

### **Media Competition in Media Industry**

Mass information production indicated and pointed out for information society. It affected the information overload. Everyone, any kind of media, industries, organizations, and government produced much the information. At the same time, all disseminated it to at the large of society. Consequently, people have several alternatives of information and can select it carefully. It's positively impact for various of information, people can select and prefer information in line with their own needs.

But conversely, overload of information can affect negative impact. According Michael Marin, we seriously face the problem in the flood of information. That problem can be understood because what kind of information that we really need, we do not know. What we experience now, we are being pushed to accept entertain and commercial information. We are observing that information which contained the knowledge for public affair is decreasing slowly but sure.

It means that among knowledge as essence of information, entertainment and commercial always compete each other. One always tries to dominate the people perception through this kind of information. Whether we will accept the entertainment and commercial information or we can avoid it. The common characteristic of this situation is ubiquitous of

information. Information is anywhere but is not giving sufficient substances.

Beside that, we also recognized that organization or institution has been producing the information to create the image for any purposes. It seems what they do in producing information as if a campaign or provocation in line with their urgent. Thus, it is clearly, situation like that can create the disinformation. Information can be manipulated, created, exploited and distorted to protect the interests.

### **Mass Media and Public Opinion**

As mentioned earlier, public opinion can be used to create the political agenda for senator, president, minister, commander of military, activist, judge, etc. Because of politics is the struggle of power, that's why communication then is used as an instrument to get the power and occupation.

To destroy other power, for instance, the former President George W Bush created the public opinion telling us that Saddam Hussein regime has destructive and mass weapon threaten the order of the world. In reality, after the bombings were done completely, Bush can't prove the opinion that was formerly created. Thus, opinion public can be trusted or can't be trusted depend on evidences. Public opinion can be true but it can be false and mislead, too. The question is why this kind of disinformation happened?

In any specific context, disinformation is not as cause but as effect. Disinformation took place because it was dictated by the power. Media can't avoid this power to follow what they define the reality although it was wrong and misleading. While this power created the public opinion in any sectors. Consequently, direct or indirect media involved disseminating the false information.

### **Conclusion Summary**

The key findings of research explained that information has multiply ways in directing political disinformation. Although mass media can be mentioned as social institutions that published the information of the events, its existence can't

be separated from interests. Politician used mass media to articulate his own interest. Legislature opposed to the government using mass media. Owner gets his goal by using media. In short they often produced the mistake information to justify their arguments or they frequently ignored the evidences that must be attached.

This is also successful identifying the framework of mass media in doing the mistake and mislead information. This finding enforced the prediction that mass media never ever stand neutrally. Either internally or externally, media involved conflict of interests and was controlled by other organizations or institutions. Media was primary instrument in the communication that was used to enforce the desired of reality. Although there is an argument that mass media can't not avoided disinformation, it did not mean the existence of mass media was intended to false and mistake of information. Thus, we still need media. But at the same time we must be alert to it.

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